

C. The Nature of the Kingdom – The Recovery of Sacred Space

Even before the tragedy of the Fall, God revealed that He intended intimate connection between Himself and His creation. Specifically, His presence and rule were to be administered through His image-bearer; man was to serve as the interface between the divine Creator and the rest of His creation. But this work of administration would not be the result of a detached delegation of authority. Adam and his descendents were to rule the earth as God's image-son; divine dominion was to be expressed in the context of divine-human communion.

God's active presence in His creation – manifested and operative in and through man – is the very essence of the idea of sacred space. Because of the nature of the Fall, sacred space was shattered and the balance of salvation history is devoted to its recovery. God's intention wasn't merely the punishment and purging of evil; it was the restoration of His creation to Himself. While the gospel proclaims the Lord's retribution against human sinfulness at Calvary, it equally insists that that just recompense had its goal in creational recovery and renewal; wrath served the purpose of reconciliation (cf. John 3:14-17, 12:30-33; Colossians 1:15-20).

If the doctrine of God's kingdom may be regarded as the Bible's central conjoining motif, the kingdom itself is defined by the principle of sacred space. As a result, when one speaks of the Lord's establishing His kingdom in Christ, he is speaking of the recovery of sacred space. This understanding isn't the product of a logical process, but is the uniform witness of the Scripture. From the day that God banished man from His garden-sanctuary, His work (and so also the inspired biblical record of that work) has been conspicuously focused on ending the estrangement between Him and His image-son. Through the reconciliation of that relationship the whole creation would enjoy its own reconciliation (cf. Isaiah 65:1-25 with Romans 8:18-23).

The biblical storyline is preoccupied with God's purpose and work in recovering sacred space, and one of the primary sub-motifs associated with this endeavor is *sanctuary* or *temple*. Divine-human estrangement is about distance – not geographical distance, but spiritual and relational distance. Man had lost his connection with his Creator-Father, so that his interaction with God subsequent to the Fall was accomplished in connection with tangible symbols and sacraments. Worship was no longer inherent, authentic intimacy; it was now a matter of mediated distance accomplished through appointed religious means.

- Thus the biblical text's first account subsequent to man's expulsion from God's presence is human worship through the vehicle of sacrificial offering (Genesis 4:1-5).
- That first act of worship is followed in the Old Testament by an endless chain of worship episodes, all defined by the ritual use of symbols (sacred sites, altars, implements, structures, etc.) and sacraments (primarily sacrificial offerings). The point is obvious:

*Human encounter with God didn't end with the introduction of divine-human estrangement. But those encounters, which bridged the distance imposed by estrangement, did so only **symbolically**. Human worship – ordered around symbols and sacraments – continued to reflect the unresolved problem of alienation between man and his Creator-Father.*

- Even Israel's tabernacle and the temple structures that later replaced it expressed the same truth. Though Yahweh set His sanctuary in the midst of the congregation of Israel and invested it with otherworldly splendor and mystery intended to provoke awe and the sense of His holy presence, He remained conspicuously distant from them. The Lord's sanctuary and its location spoke of the Father dwelling in the very presence of His covenant son, but still in the context of awkward and fearful distance.
- Given the symbolic significance of God's sanctuary, it's easy to see why His developing promise of reconciliation with His image-son would embrace the imagery of "temple." Reconciliation meant the recovery of sacred space, and, from the beginning of Israelite history, sacred space – signifying the realm in which God is present in and accessible to His creation – had been expressed in terms of a physical dwelling place. Yahweh's presence with His people was attested by His sanctuary in their midst. Thus, when He sent them away from His presence He destroyed the temple, and He likewise attended the recovery of the exiles to His "sanctuary-land" with the temple's reconstruction.

The promise of Yahweh's kingdom was the promise of His recovery of sacred space, and, within the Israelite context, sacred space was symbolized in Israel's temple in Jerusalem. This is the reason the prophetic witness to the kingdom has a primary focal point in the temple concept. In that day the *mountain* of the Lord – symbolic of His dwelling place (Exodus 15:17) – would be the greatest of all the mountains (Isaiah 2:1-3; Zechariah 8:1-3), rising and expanding to fill the whole earth (Daniel 2:31-35, 44-45; cf. also Isaiah 11:9). So *Jerusalem* (Zion) – the Lord's symbolic throne – would be the center of the earth with all the nations and peoples coming into it (ref. again Isaiah 2:1-3, also 51:1-11, 62:1-12, 66:19-20 with Jeremiah 3:14-17, 31:1-6; Micah 4:1-7; Zechariah 8:19-23). And more narrowly, that great day would see the erecting of the Lord's true *temple* with His glory filling His sanctuary forever (ref. Ezekiel 40-47, esp. 43:1-5 and 44:1-4; also Haggai 2:1-9; Zechariah 6:9-15).

Well before the captivities, the sons of Israel understood the connection between Yahweh's kingdom and His sanctuary, and this is the reason the post-exile prophets were so emphatic that the remnant's reconstruction of the physical temple in Jerusalem didn't indicate the impending inauguration of the eschatological kingdom proclaimed by their predecessors. As with David's former kingdom, the Lord's dwelling place in the midst of His people would highlight the final kingdom, but the sanctuary of that kingdom was to be built by the Davidic Branch (Zechariah 6:9-15); until that day, any temple in Jerusalem only spoke of fulfillment yet to come.

1. The Fulfillment of Sacred Space in Christ

The concept of *temple* (sanctuary) is a central theme in the Old Testament doctrine of the kingdom. The reason is that the kingdom of God is a redemptive and relational phenomenon and the temple concept speaks to the place of divine-human encounter and interaction. The Lord manifested Himself as dwelling in the Holy of Holies between the wings of the cherubim, and so if a person wished to meet with and worship Him he had to journey to the place of His sanctuary. This principle became codified for Israel in the law of the central sanctuary (Deuteronomy 12:1-14); whereas all Canaan had been Yahweh's sanctuary, now His presence resided more specifically on Mount Zion in Jerusalem.

When considered alongside Jesus' insistence that His presence indicated the fulfillment of all the Scriptures and the in-breaking of the promised kingdom, the centrality of the temple motif in the Old Testament and its doctrine of the kingdom leads to the expectation that He would present Himself and His coming as somehow fulfilling the temple concept. In fact, this is exactly what the four gospel writers reveal.

- a. The first way they do so is the most fundamental and profound. Jesus is the fulfillment of the temple because, in His **person**, He is the conjoining of deity and humanity; He is the place where God and man are brought together and commune with each other. This is the doctrine of the *hypostatic union*, and it speaks to the fact that, in the one undivided and indivisible person of Jesus of Nazareth, the divine and human natures are perfectly and harmoniously conjoined. The apostle John deals with this doctrine more fully than any of the other gospel writers, and it is worthwhile to consider his treatment a little further.

The hypostatic union is implied in Jesus as *Immanuel*, but, in itself, the Immanuel idea in relation to Him is vague. That is to say, while it indicates that Jesus' incarnation somehow represents the presence of God, it doesn't explain how that is the case. Matthew brings some clarification by showing that Jesus as "Immanuel" involves divine conception, but he, too, leaves unexplained the mystery of the God-Man. How is that Jesus is equally and fully God and man?

John takes the argument the furthest, but in the end the doctrine of the hypostatic union is developed mostly through the accounts of Jesus' life, words, and work rather than by direct pronouncement or explanation.

- Because of his goal for his account, John begins his gospel in eternity past with a direct proclamation of Jesus' deity (1:1-2). As true God, the Logos is the *source* of all created things, but He is equally the *destiny* of all things (1:3-13). The latter implicates His incarnational status as true Man: The divine Logos became *man* in order to **tabernacle** among men (1:14). John's peculiar word choice was intentional, evident in his subsequent proclamation that, while previously no person had ever seen God as He really is, now that is no longer the case. *The "only begotten God" has come to explain ("exegete") God to men by taking on their humanity in Himself and encountering them on that common ground* (1:18).

Yahweh was now "tabernacling" among men – not in the form of a glory-cloud behind a veil, but by His tangible, personal presence in the person of His Son. Thus John could declare that the grace and truth to which the Law pointed as it revealed Yahweh had now been realized in Jesus of Nazareth. Promise had yielded itself up to fulfillment (1:16-17).

- This introduction provides the foundation for the rest of John's account, and so leads immediately to his presentation of Jesus as the man indwelled by the Spirit (1:32-34) and therefore Yahweh's true sanctuary (2:13-21).

- So also John uniquely records the episode Jesus' self-disclosure to Nathaniel in which He declares Himself to be the fulfillment of Jacob's dream episode at Bethel (1:43-51; cf. Genesis 28:10-22). In that incident Yahweh affirmed to Jacob that His covenant with Abraham had now passed to him; Jacob could depart the covenant land for Haran (the place from which Abraham had first entered Canaan at God's direction) with full confidence that the Lord would go with him, provide for him, and bring him safely back to the land of his fathers. Though Jacob was leaving the covenant land, he wasn't leaving the covenant God; Yahweh's enduring commitment to His covenant stood fast, regardless of where His covenant son resided. This promise to Jacob – who would become *Israel* – would later provide the foundation of hope for the nation of descendants bearing his name: The man "Israel" could lead his household from the covenant land into Egypt with full confidence that, at the appointed time, the Lord would restore Abraham's covenant seed back to His sacred habitation (cf. Genesis 46:14, 50:1-13, 24-26; Exodus 3:1ff).

In Jacob's dream, a series of steps formed the bridge between God and the covenant heir. On those steps Jacob saw Yahweh's angels ascending and descending and now, Jesus was telling Nathaniel that what that sacred scene signified was being fulfilled in Him. Thus John's point: As the Man who is Yahweh's true dwelling, Jesus is Himself the quintessential point of divine-human intimacy. But His identity as the divine "Son of Man" was to serve the Lord's goal of recovering sacred space: The conjoining of God and man in Christ was to bring about the reconciliation of God and mankind. Clowney observes: *"The stairway was a picture in Jacob's dream. But what the dream promised became a reality in Christ's Incarnation. God came down in the person of His Son to dwell on the earth. Christ is the link between earth and heaven. He is the true Bethel, the House of God, Immanuel, God with us."* (The Unfolding Mystery)

- Because Jesus is the true and singular temple, He is also the fulfillment of the law of the central sanctuary. That law had prescribed a single place which God would claim for Himself (where He would "put His name") and there alone He would manifest His presence by His Shekinah. If men were to meet with Him, they had to come to Him where He was.

Jerusalem had been that place since David's reign, but with the coming of the true sanctuary Jerusalem's status as Yahweh's habitation had come to an end. This is the point of John's account of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman (4:1-26). Recognizing Him to be a prophet, the woman asked Jesus about the conflicting views of the Jews and Samaritans regarding where God is to be worshipped (vv. 19-20). Jesus' response was that worship was no longer about a place but a spiritual reality. The Father sought worshippers, not at Jerusalem or Mount Gerizim, but in the spiritual "place" defined by *Spirit* and *truth*. So Greg Beale:

“One need not go to the Jerusalem temple to be near God’s revelatory presence but only need trust in Jesus to experience that presence. This is why Jesus says that the time was dawning when true worship would not occur at the Jerusalem temple, nor any other holy site, but would be directed toward the Father (and, by implication, through the Messiah) in the sphere of the coming eschatological Spirit of Jesus.”

Addressing the connection between this context and Jesus’ previous meeting with Nathaniel, Beale continues: *“A link with heaven would be created by the Spirit wherever there was trust in Christ, and those so trusting would come within the sphere of the true temple consisting of Christ and His Spirit.”* (The Temple and the Church’s Mission)

- John advances Jesus’ self-identification with the temple in his account of the Feast of Tabernacles (7:1-53). At the pinnacle of the feast Christ stood and proclaimed that all who believe in Him will find living waters flowing out of their innermost being (vv. 37-39). This language clearly draws upon the prophecies of Ezekiel, Joel, and Zechariah in which life-giving water is shown flowing out of the Lord’s temple *in the day when He comes to cleanse and renew His creation and establish His kingdom* (ref. Ezekiel 47:1-12; Joel 3:16-21; Zechariah 14:1-11). Though this “living water” is said to flow out of the believer, it has its source in Jesus from whom the person “drinks” (v. 37). Being the true temple, He is the point of origination of the rivers of the water of life (cf. Revelation 21:22, 22:1-2).
- b. Jesus’ identity as the fulfilled temple is most clearly seen in His person, but it is also evident in the **purpose** of His coming. Specifically, He entered the world as the God-Man in order to recover sacred space by reconciling all things to God. In that way He would usher in the long-promised kingdom.

As seen, the promise of the coming kingdom is everywhere associated with temple and sanctuary imagery. The reason, again, is that God presents His kingdom as being established through His deliverance of His people (and the whole creation) from their captivity (*redemption*) in order to restore them (and all things) to Himself (*reconciliation*). The true kingdom is about restored relationship and recovered intimacy, and, considered from within the framework of the Israelite kingdom (as was the case with the prophets), the temple concept speaks to this dynamic more powerfully than anything else. The temple represented sacred space – the reality of divine-human encounter and communion.

Thus the promise of the kingdom was the promise of *restored sanctuary*. As would be expected, this theme comes to the forefront in the historical context of the captivities. The temple was to be destroyed, but just as Yahweh promised the restoration of David’s house and kingdom, so He promised the restoration of His own “house.” A new “David” would restore the kingdom, and that same Davidide would build the Lord’s house (ref. again Zechariah 6:9-15; also Amos 9:11-15).